

Book Review: Comic Performance in Pakistan: The Bhānd by Claire Pamment

In *Comic Performance in Pakistan: The Bhānd*, Claire Pamment explores the centuries-old tradition of Pakistani bhānd performances which have used comedy to tread a line between flattery and challenging patrons' authority. Asad Abbasi, however, argues that Pamment's work is anything but comedy, and reveals the discriminations faced by this subaltern population.

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The Punjabi stage show weaves together abrasive and acerbic wit, and hyper-sexualised dance sequences with nationalistic, moral and religious dialogues. In these stage shows, nothing is sacred, yet everything is sacrosanct. This contradictory art form, with its simultaneous 'asserting and debunking', as Claire Pamment demonstrates in *Comic Performance in Pakistan*, has existed in South Asia for centuries.

'In Punjab, bhānds comprise a comic male duo'. One, the 'straight man', is a serious, authoritarian figure. The other, 'a chaotic and more radical clown' (6). The Punjabi popular stage theatre is but one incarnation of the 'bhānd' phenomenon. For centuries, by using this basic structure to cover every topic from the 'donkey cart to the aeroplane', bhānds have performed for kings, rulers, landlords, politicians, peasants, the working class and passersby.

The bhānds' genealogy, according to Pamment, draws from the Brahmin jesters—like Tenali Rama and Raja Birbal— and the Sufi wise fools— like Bahlul and Mullah Nasruddin. Whereas the Sufi wise fools performed for the royals and the commons, Brahmin jesters performed exclusively for the royal court. Yet, both— the Brahmin jester and the Sufi fool— impart moral edicts to their audience. The bhānd, however, is beyond moral edicts and emerges as a complex, critical and even controversial figure.

The bhānd is a cynic, a critic, a Sufi, a saint, a satan, a wise man, a fool. The bhānd spares nobody. The bhānd questions your conservative attitude and your liberalism. The bhānd banishes you for wearing a tie or fashioning a beard. The bhānd mocks you for wearing jeans or a veil. The bhānd heckles you when you look at a woman or you shy away from looking. The bhānd mocks you for your clothes or lack thereof. The bhānd does not care about your religion nor your sect. The bhānd does not care about your gender, nor your orientation. Everything that you pretend to be is likely to be questioned, ridiculed, satirised. Depending on the day of the week and the mood of the bhānds, you will all be ridiculed, some more than others.

But simultaneously, your cultural status and social standing are praised. Your good deeds are publicly announced and emphasised by the bhānd. If you are rich, or from a wealthy family, you will be praised for your wealth and 'good' family. If you lack wealth, you will be praised for your modesty. You are thanked for your patronage and high status, intelligence, beauty, luck and generosity. Praise bestowed, order restored. This is the package that you pay for; this is the package that the bhānd has specialised in for centuries. This, Pamment argues, is the process of 'asserting' and 'debunking', and this is the bhānd's livelihood.





Image Credit: The entrance to the old Aziz theatre in Taxali gate, Lahore (Walled City of Lahore Authority [CC BY-SA 4.0](#))

To suggest that Pamment's book explores only the bhānds in Punjab would be to say that Carlo Ginzberg's *The Cheese and The Worms* only traces the daily struggles of a sixteenth-century Italian miller. Prima facie, Ginzburg focuses on an individual in the sixteenth century, yet his subject matter is broader, even dangerous, as it discusses enlightenment, religion, education, culture and so forth. Similarly, Pamment focuses on the art of bhānds, but in doing so, she covers caste ideology in Pakistan; the prominence of class hierarchies; the art of dissent; the role of women in an all-male industry; and the perseverance, struggles and survival of the bhānds. Pamment, unfortunately, does so without Ginzberg's style and storytelling. Ginzberg transports you to Menocchio's trial, but Pamment intermittently jolts her readers with academic vernacular, which results in an intellectual irritant. The language, concepts and themes of the book suggest that Pamment only targets academics. It is unfortunate because Pamment's work deserves a wider— much wider— audience.

Pamment classifies bhānds into three categories: the wedding bhānds, the stage show bhānds and the television bhānds. Each classification differs from the other two with regards to the audience, medium of performance, freedom of expression, control over the script material and, most importantly, income. The television bhānds earn the highest income, whereas the wedding bhānds face incessant penury. Theatre bhānds enjoy varying fame and income but hold the most freedom to express agency, barring any state sanctions, whilst the wedding bhānds are expert genealogists and 'can disclose embarrassing information that patrons would rather keep hidden, and, conversely announce histories that patrons would like to project' (110).

Many bhānds proudly claim to have performed for the Bhutto family and the Sharif family. If the bhānd exposes class hierarchies, why would politicians invite them? The reason is simple. Through praise the bhānd elevates, and through criticism the bhānd humanises the patron among the wedding attendees. The bhānd disturbs and affirms class hierarchies through debunking and asserting. For such qualities, politicians feel compelled to invite and financially support the bhānds.

When the bhānd performs in front of the working-class or rural family, the bhānd talks about 'aspirations of making it rich in the city [...but] also criticizes the symbols of power of the ruling elite establishment' (128). The bhānd tweaks the performance to suit the specific audience. This requires excellent and extensive research. Pamment recalls that when she met one of the bhānds for an interview, he was well-informed about Pamment and her family.

The bhānds are not fans of two groups: the aspiring middle class and the army. The reason is that both these groups continuously try to distance themselves from the bhānd.

The aspiring middle class continues to distance itself from the bhānd and bhānd culture. Classical, semi-classical music and bagpipes are the wedding entertainments at the commercial wedding halls. In such a setting, 'the bhānd potentially becomes a difficult encounter for those with things to hide, the bourgeoisie's nightmare reminding audiences from where they apparently come and critiquing their ambition of power' (123). The reason the bhānds dislike the army is far simpler: army barracks are 'comedy no-go zones' (119-20).

Ironically, the army is responsible for the bhānd's movement into theatre and television. Post-1947, with Pakistan a sovereign country, the Lahore theatre culture, Pamment notes, relied on Anglo-Saxon plays adopted in Urdu for the upper-middle-class milieu and sanitised from any political critique. Until the 1970s, the theatre 'was a place of the elite by the elites and for the elites' (136). The elites banished and criticised those from the bhānd background for having 'no literary background'. The deputy director 'felt [the bhānd...] should be kept separate from the theatre' (141). Forget the discrimination against other ethnicities, Pamment shows how caste and class segregate people who speak the same language, belong to the same region and associate with the same religion.

With General Zia's cultural banishments, many theatre actors moved into television. The bhānds took over the empty theatre. By the time Benazir Bhutto came to power, the bhānds had gained financial support to run the popular stage theatre. By the 1990s, the burlesque, sexualised dance performance entered the popular Punjabi stage theatres. A few dancers even headlined the shows and commanded higher fees.

In this context, Pamment focuses on the issue of the 'male gaze'. Pamment argues that for the female characters, dancing provides a route to enter popular stage shows. Otherwise, the all-male industry assigned women ephemeral appearances, without role, without agency. The dancer 'by playing with the conventions of theatre and its gazing patterns, she knowingly uses objectification to turn the gaze back on the patriarchal structure and in doing so she asserts power' (146). Pamment understands that she is taking a difficult position and acknowledges the 'criticism from feminist quarters that these women were reduced to "consumerist objects" and controlled by male producers and audiences' (144-45). Pamment understands that stage show dancers are objectified, but she argues that, just like the bhānds, the dancers use their precarious status to counter the male gaze. It is not just the 'feminist quarters' or people from the parallel theatre, but 'many of the popular theatre's formative actors are keen to disassociate themselves from its contemporary sexual context and have left the stage or have passed away in disillusionment' (165).

Once again, the army plays an indirect role in the bhānd's movement from theatre to television. It was General Musharraf's appearance on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* that inspired Aftab Iqbal, an influential journalist, to create *Hasb-e-Haal* (177). In *Hasb-e-Haal*, Iqbal plays a serious 'anchor' and Sohail Ahmed, the bhānd, plays a fool. But soon, Pamment writes, the off-screen rifts between the two emerged as both men fought to control the narrative of the show. In an interview, Iqbal told Pamment that Ahmed is 'just a performer' who fancies himself as a political pundit (179). In this case, Ahmed had the last laugh as Iqbal left the show to start a new show where he plays the same, serious, wise man 'commanding' eight bhānds who perform and entertain the audience. *Hasb-e-Haal*, based on the bhānd format, started a new trend which dozens of networks now copy.

In each setting, the bhānds are assigned a low status by the society. The bhānd, however, fights this status with praise and with critique. At wedding ceremonies, on stage or on television, the bhānds continue to fight the hierarchies which disapprove of them and praise the hierarchies which support them. In each setting, Pamment sides with the bhānds and their struggles against the social and cultural stigma attached to the art. Perhaps, Pamment sides with the bhānds a bit too much.

For example, the popular stage show begins with the national anthem followed immediately with a song layered with sexual undertones. This contrast, Pamment feels, is 'playful manipulation of hierarchical structures' (134). Yet, a simpler explanation is that the bhānd fulfils audience expectation: a bit of patriotism mixed with a bit of perversity. Similarly, Pamment subscribes too much power to the bhānds' critique of the political class. The structure of the bhānd performance—the debunking and asserting—is based on the political economy of the bhānd. The bhānd relies on the patron's generous gift. Could the bhānd bite the hand that feeds it? Within this structure, very few bhānds criticise politicians vehemently, but many others do it with caution.

Pamment briefly explores yet another important topic: the right of representation. The bhānds argue that the cultural elites of Lahore (and Karachi) —with their ‘first-class failed’ degrees, skin-tight jeans and ties, accents, stories of London and New York and, finally, their lack of interest in rural issues— are not the true representatives of Pakistani art. But the bhānds understand, and so does Pamment, that for the international community it is far easier to communicate with and promote people who look, speak and think as them. The bhānds paint a difficult picture to appreciate. The bhānds wants your support, but will attack your manners. The bhānd questions religion but also secularism. The bhānd wants to be part of the system but will not abide by the civil rules of the society. The bhānd conforms to norms but destabilises them too. The bhānd ‘dishes harder truths that might unsettle the neo-imperial paradigms’ (203).

The book is published with [Palgrave Studies in Comedy](#), yet Pamment’s work is anything but comedy. It reveals discriminations that these ‘subaltern’ artists face against the bastions of their art. The book tells the story of people who used to perform for kings, rulers and the ‘common people’, but now fight penury, despair and disillusionment. But it is also a story of people in constant flux and revival, and, in that, one finds hope.

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Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.